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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the moral underpinnings of results-oriented accountability, drawing on lessons learned while teaching a seminar on accountability and highlighting the development of accountability policy in North Carolina. The paper notes that contemporary thinking about results-oriented accountability "reeks" of moral judgment. It contends that the widespread support for results-oriented accountability cannot be understood apart from identifying and depicting its fundamentally moral basis. It takes an expansive view of the moral in education, suggesting that the moral can go considerably beyond the question of the teaching of basic values and proper conduct. Beyond that realm, the paper considers the moral as embodying both the quality of the student-teacher relationship and the decision about which content is important enough to be included in the school curriculum. After describing the seminar, the paper discusses the moral responses of students and looks at the amoral readings. Next, it examines the moral roots of accountability. Finally, the paper discusses the reorientation of next year's seminar after the experience with North Carolina's accountability policy. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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The Moral Bases of Accountability:
What I Learned Through My Seminar on Accountability

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During a recent meeting of the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee, Senator Jeanne Lucas, a former teacher, asked: "Are you going to leave him sitting there until he's as big as we are?" (O'Connor, 1998, p. A4). Lucas' comment was made as she questioned what the schools were going to do with a third-grader who failed the end-of-grade test year after year. Proposing to end social promotion is the last phase of developing accountability policy in North Carolina. In a step-by-step manner over the past several years, the North Carolina General Assembly and the State Board of Education have set rewards and punishments for school systems, schools, and educators. Now, as columnist Paul O'Connor observes, "the onus is about to fall on students and parents."

According to the logic of results-oriented accountability, the child is ultimately responsible for learning. Henry Johnson, an official of the Department of Public Instruction, told Senator Lucas that "when her [hypothetical] third-grader learned that he was going to stay in third grade until he did third grade work, he would push himself. 'I think that most kids are going to rise to those standards'" (O'Connor, 1998, p. A4). In the North Carolina plan -- as well as in the accountability plans of many other states -- underperforming children are presumed able to do the academic work, if only they were compelled to do so. Indeed, in absence of sanctions, students are viewed as taking school work lightly and doing only what is needed to get by.

Contemporary thinking about results-oriented accountability reeks of moral judgment, both in its endorsement of a "get tough" stance with children, in its unequivocal proclamation about what is important to learn, in its quest to centralize the control of education in the state, and in its intent to make teachers and principals be directly answerable for the learning of children. I contend that the widespread support for results-oriented accountability cannot be understood apart from identifying and depicting its fundamentally moral basis. That interpretive task is central to this paper, and I draw upon what I learned from teaching a seminar on accountability as I outline the moral underpinnings of results-oriented accountability. Any alternative vision of accountability must also be morally grounded if it is to have authority beyond the academic and policy community. In the latter part of this paper, I address how we might start to construct a view of accountability with a moral basis which differs from the unconditional moral vision which underlies bottom-line accountability.

The "moral" in education is commonly viewed as a separate and independent component of education. Thus, we think of moral education as instruction about what values are to be embraced by the young and which behaviors and actions are to be considered right (and wrong). Other elements of education -- for example, the basics of reading, writing, and math -- are seen as important but somehow outside the moral realm. This separation of moral

education from academic study seems quaintly out of date, a carryover of the old positivist tendency to try to separate values from knowledge.

In this analysis, I will take an expansive view of the moral in education, and suggest that the moral can go considerably beyond the question of the teaching of basic values and proper conduct. Beyond that realm, I will consider the moral as embodying both the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Hawkins, 1973; Noddings, 1984) and the decision about which content is important enough to be included in the school curriculum (Kliebard, 1989; Tom, 1984). The moral in education, therefore, involves both explicit instruction about the nature of the good life and the content and the human relationships which are designed to help children achieve this good life. However, any attempt to tightly link values and proper conduct to worthy curriculum content and a desirable student-teacher relationship runs counter to the way these two sets of considerations have typically been disconnected in the popular mind.

The Study of Accountability in My Seminar

This past fall, I taught a doctoral seminar in which the major task was to critique the ABCs accountability system in North Carolina. The ABCs acronym stands for accountability, basics, and local control, and this approach to accountability has been developed through a combination of legislative acts by the North Carolina General Assembly, policy actions of the State

Board of Education and the independently elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as by a variety of initiatives from the Department of Public Instruction. I stress the coordination of these diverse political entities because such coordination usually has not occurred in the past. The public appeal of results-oriented accountability seems to have overcome some poor working relationships, even animosities, among these entities.

Now in its third year, the ABCs accountability model initially entailed at attempt to use student test scores -- reading, mathematics, and writing in the elementary school and a somewhat broader array of subjects at the secondary level -- to rate schools. For the top ranking, "exemplary," teachers at a school receive a bonus of $1,500., while the lowest ranking, "low performing," could lead to sending a state "assistance team" to a school to help the teachers improve their instruction. In addition, principals of schools identified as "low performing" can also be relieved of their duties.

In preparation for the seminar which was part of a new doctoral specialization in Culture, Curriculum and Change, I decided that we would read some articles in common at the beginning of the seminar to explore the overall issue of accountability. My first surprise was how little literature I could find on the idea of accountability itself. I found literature on high stakes testing, both literature about the

technical aspects of testing and about the effects of high stakes testing on the curriculum (e.g., Madaus, 1988). I also found a limited number of studies in which the impact of state accountability programs had been examined, particularly in the case of Kentucky (e.g., Jones & Whitford, 1997; Kannapel and other, 1996). But I located only one study of the impact of the ABCs in North Carolina (Miller, Hayes, & Atkinson, 1997), and I could find no literature in which philosophers or other scholars explored accountability in a conceptual way.

This last omission really puzzled me, and I may have missed a body of literature on the idea of accountability. I am still in search of analyses in which the presumptions of accountability are explored, and alternative views of accountability outlined and analyzed. In any case, in order to stimulate some discussion in my seminar about the assumptions which underlie the ABCs view of accountability, I fell back on an article which described a plan at Eastern Michigan University whereby coaches were to be paid according to such factors as their number of victories, attendance at athletic contests, and the grades of their athletes (Macnow, 1985).

I was unsure about the wisdom of drawing comparisons between athletic contests and the teaching-learning process in classrooms, but a number of interesting questions were raised by this athletic analogy. If a coach is to be evaluated and rewarded by the win-loss record, what happens when a coach does

not have an equivalent recruiting budget, an equal number of scholarships, and so forth as compared to other coaches in the same athletic conference? (Similar to differences in students from one classroom to another.) Will coaches urge their athletes to play when injured? (What should be done with ESL children at testing time? Special education children?) Will coaches try to play weaker opponents? (Norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced approaches to testing.)

Going beyond these intricacies, Kathleen Tinney, Eastern Michigan University's Director of Information Services, contended that this "policy is designed to reward the coaches who consistently achieve championships, and to motivate the others.... Until now, the best coach got the same raise as the coach of the last-placed wrestling team." (An obvious comparison to salary schedules for public school teachers.) On the other hand, Brad Kinsman, the Athletic Director from the University of Detroit, noted that this approach would "put too much pressure on coaches to win at all costs" (Macnow, 1985, p. 27). Athletic accountability compared and contrasted rather nicely to educational accountability. I actually was almost excited about using this article in the seminar since I thought the narrative in the article had a number of possibilities for sharpening and throwing new perspectives on the accountability issues embedded in the North Carolina ABCs.

At the first meeting of the seminar, I had the class read

the Eastern Michigan article, a task that was completed in about five minutes. The discussion which followed was much less interesting than I had anticipated. The group did entertain several of the comparisons implicit in the athletic analogy, and briefly discussed two or three of them. No great insights were achieved, nor were any substantial passions aroused. The discussion was casual, even blase. Looking back, I can see that the article, while suggesting interesting and possibly even novel comparisons, did not tap the feelings which the ABCs prompted from my students.

Both during that first class discussion and later in the semester the major reaction to the ABCs accountability policy was strongly affective. For some, there was a sense of resignation; the ABCs are just another in a long line of state mandates teachers must cope with. For others, there was a much more visceral reaction, almost an outright rejection without much interest in analyzing the issues which were embedded in the North Carolina ABC policy. Why bother parsing a policy which is fundamentally flawed?

My major writing assignment for the seminar -- having the whole class prepare a "white paper" on the ABCs -- proved to be particularly inappropriate. Those who belonged to the "resignation" camp were quite willing to fine tune the ABCs policy, hoping to take a bit of the sting out of it while waiting for the state of North Carolina to abandon this policy and move

on to the next fad. Those in the "resistance" camp thought a whole new accountability policy was needed, and thus saw any recrafting of the existing policy as a waste of time, even a misuse of our class time.

These fundamentally differing perspectives in my class became evident to me about half way through the semester when there was a sharp interchange one afternoon among seminar members. The essence of the disagreement centered on whether the ABC policy had any underlying value. I entered into the discussion and tried to claim that our differences in opinion would not prevent us from working together as a group to prepare a white paper on the ABCs, and at one level I may have been correct. I contended that we did not all have to agree in order to critique a policy; we could come to consensus on particular ways the ABCs policy was in need of revision even if we held divergent views of the basic value of this policy.

However, what I did not perceive was the strength and emotive power of class members' reactions. The "resignation" camp saw themselves as realists who were in tune with the way the political world of schooling operates. This subgroup did not mind offering some critical reaction to ABCs policy, but were not particularly interested in doing so. After all, state legislators and other state officials who formulated state policy were not that interested in the views of practitioners anyway. Why play their game, especially when the rules of the game were

going to change in a couple of years anyway? The "resistance" camp also was unwilling to play along with analyzing and critiquing the ABCs policy, but their opposition was rooted in their disdain for this wrongheaded policy. The ABCs policy centralized power too much in the state, and ignored the voices of both the practitioner and the local community. There simply was no way to modify this policy and make it an acceptable and wise policy.

A Moral Response By Students, But "Amoral" Readings

I may have oversimplified how my students reacted to the ABCs policy. I doubt that any of them consciously saw themselves as members of either a "resignation" or a "resistance" camp. The lines were not that tightly drawn between members of the seminar. In addition, some seminar members did not seem to see themselves as part of either of the camps I have hypothesized were present in my seminar group. (I plan to make this paper available to seminar members so they can provide a check on my interpretations.)

However, I am convinced that the reactions of my students to the ABCs were at such a primal level that this response reflected a fundamental moral response. In the case of the "resistance" subgroup, I think the response was one of moral revulsion; to this subgroup, the ABCs simply lacked appropriate moral authority to be take seriously. At a number of points during the semester, those I have characterized as resisters spoke with feeling about

why the ABCs was a bad policy. For the "resignation" group, the reaction was outwardly less obvious, since resignation tends to be a subdued and submissive response. But resignation can also embody a passionate feeling, a feeling of sorrow for those who are naive and gullible enough to ignore the realities of state policy making in education.

By my associating primal with moral, I do not mean to suggest that the moral is disconnected from thought and reflection, only that the moral seemed to be first expressed by seminar members through a basic emotional response. In fact, after using this paper to recreate the events of last fall, I now believe that I missed a real teaching opportunity to link the initial moral responses of my seminar members to a broader set of intellectual and practical concerns.

I suppose that my introduction of the athletic analogy did serve to identify some of the assumptions or issues which are implicit in the ABCs policy. Judging a coach (or teacher) by outcomes does raise the question of what happens when all players (students) are not equivalent. Will coaches (teachers) push their athletes (students) unmercifully hard when victories (test scores) are the ultimate criterion? And so forth. However, these assumptions and issues are already widely known to practitioners. So, was anything new really being achieved by the athletic analogy, other than the novelty of recognizing some commonalities across types of professional endeavor.

Even more telling, I doubt that the issues raised by the athletic analogy and by many other pieces of literature I used with (or recommended for) seminar members successfully raised underlying moral issues. For example, an article (Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991) on the impact of repeated standardized testing on students suggests that "the cumulative effects of achievement tests can have debilitating and progressively negative consequences for students' learning and motivation" (p. 19). While this outcome is undoubtedly important and a cause for concern, this information does not necessarily strike directly at the moral basis of high stakes testing. Instead, the survey findings on which the article is based can be addressed by relatively minor, technical adjustments to the testing process. For example, "some districts might decide to stop testing children below third grade or choose to test only a random sample of students at each grade or to give fewer tests" (p. 17).

While the article by Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth (1991) was on my suggested reading list, an account of a state-wide survey conducted by several University of North Carolina graduate students, along with one of my faculty colleagues, was required reading in one of our early seminar sessions. According to this survey (Williamson, 1998), teachers held a number of opinions which could easily be interpreted as negative reactions to the ABCs policy. "Two-thirds [of the sampled teachers] said they have changed teaching strategies to prepare students specifically

for the state tests and some give more tests, more worksheets and more lectures than they otherwise would" (p. A7). Over half of the teachers reported they spend "more than 40 percent of their school time having students practice for end-of-grade tests" (p. A7). In addition, over half of the teachers reported that their colleagues have developed "more negative attitudes toward low-achieving students," and about half of these teachers said they would consider changing schools if theirs was designated as "low preforming."

As in the case of the article describing the effects of repeated testing on students, the "problems" revealed by the state-wide survey of teachers can be addressed by technical adjustments in the North Carolina ABCs policy, though many of the changes would be major. Financial incentives could be instituted to encourage strong teachers to stay in schools designated as low performing, but these incentives might have to be substantial. Some educators and policy makers argue that having teachers teach to the test(s) is not necessarily a bad idea, providing the tests are good ones. In addition, teachers do not have to develop negative attitudes toward low achieving students, since the ABCs formula for rating schools entails year-to-year "growth" in school-level test scores, as well as "performance" comparisons across all the schools in North Carolina (1997-98 ABCs report card). In fact, some teachers have decided that the easiest way to accomplish significant growth is to work intensively with

students who are low achieving.

While the readings which I used or recommended to my students tended not to emphasize a moral basis for the ABCs accountability policy, there was a place in many readings in which a moral posture was at least implied. For example, Gail Jones, my faculty colleague who supervised the state-wide teacher survey, explained the basis for this survey in this way: "We conducted this random survey because we felt teachers' voices had not been heard by policymakers and administrators" (Williamson, 1998, p. A7). By emphasizing the issue of voice, Jones' motivation does seem to be grounded in a moral stance. Similarly, the analysis by Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth (1991) of the effects of testing on students' thinking and behavior also recognized that achievement testing has a moral underpinning: "Students, teachers, administrators, and parents need to have opportunities to communicate about assessment because decisions about testing reflect educational values. Only through dialogue will the stakeholders debate their values and investments in assessment" (p. 18).

Yet only a small portion of any particular seminar reading was oriented in a moral direction. Some readings which were on my syllabus literally did not recognize that accountability had a moral basis and were in the "how-to-do-it" tradition, e.g., King and Mathers (1997) or Marzano and Kendall (1996). This lack of attention by my seminar readings to the moral basis of

accountability plus my "white paper" assignment which diverted students from viewing accountability in moral terms probably directed our analysis of the ABCs accountability policy away from its moral basis.

The Moral Roots of Accountability

At this point, I am not prepared to offer a comprehensive view of the moral basis of accountability; such a view is beyond my reach. Instead I will draw from the experience of my seminar last fall, as well as from other discussions I have had with practitioners about the ABCs, to map out some of the moral terrain for accountability in education. I focus on accountability for results, since that is the predominant view of accountability.

In the introduction to this paper, I noted that contemporary thinking about results-oriented accountability reeks of moral judgment. Certainly, the view that teachers are accountable for the learning of their students and students cannot be promoted unless they master particular content are affirmations of moral responsibility. I used to think that the simplicity of these affirmations was the reason for their widespread public acceptance, but I am reconsidering that interpretation.

Part of that reconsideration grows out of a discussion I had with my curriculum theory class earlier this semester about the ABCs policy. While this discussion brought out a litany of practitioner complaints about the ABCs -- the narrowness of

tested curriculum, the pressure to teach to the tests, and so forth -- one of my students made a different point. He said that while he did not like all aspects of the ABCs, the policy was the first time that the state of North Carolina had accepted any level of responsibility for low performing schools. In the past, this student said, the state ignored the issue of achievement at the school level, and nothing happened if the local school district chose to ignore low academic performance in one of its schools. Now, the rating of each school appears in the newspapers, and the evasion of responsibility by a school district is much harder.

The question, of course, is what kind of responsibility is being assumed by the state of North Carolina. Very few new resources are being allocated by the General Assembly to the schools. What seems to happen -- no one knows conclusively, since the impact of the ABCs is not being systematically studied -- is that local districts are reallocating their local funds toward those schools which are designated as low performing. In other words, one major effect of the ABCs program appears to be that money is being diverted by local districts from one set of priorities to a new use which is presumed to be more important. The major claim about resources by officials from the Department of Public Instruction is that local school boards -- as part of the local control component of ABCs -- have increased flexibility in the expenditure of state funds, as well being able to obtain

waivers of certain state laws and regulations which inhibit the achievement of local accountability goals (ABCs of Public Education).

Even the Department of Public Instruction, therefore, does not assert that significant additional funding is being directed to the North Carolina public schools as part of the ABCs initiative. One local columnist noted that if the General Assembly did not provide additional funding for the notoriously under-funded public schools of North Carolina to implement the ABCs, then perhaps state legislators should not receive their pay checks, a clever allusion to the General Assembly's attempt to tie the pay of teachers to student results. Thus, the state's assumption of responsibility for low performing schools has severe limits.

The actual degree of responsibility, however, does not have to be determined in order to argue that the state did assume a moral responsibility when it established the ABCs policy. Administrators and teachers also assumed a moral responsibility for school-level performance, and in the end the child is also embedded in this web of responsibilities. One way to dissect the moral basis for accountability under the ABCs is to ask whether each of the parties which has assumed a moral responsibility is living up to the terms of that responsibility.

A second aspect of the moral basis of state accountability concerns the question of voice. Public school teachers in North

Carolina, as Jones suggested when she was interviewed about why she wanted to do the survey (Williamson, 1998), did not have a significant role in the creation of this policy, a situation similar to the omission of teachers' voices in the educational reforms of the last 20 years (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993). Yet teachers were only one group which seems to have been omitted from a role in the setting of the ABCs policy. In many ways, the ABCs has removed what vestiges of local control still exist in North Carolina, a state which has a tradition of centralized control of education. Several members of my seminar group raised the concern that community representatives were not part of the standard-setting process.

My purpose, however, is not to prove that a particular constellation of voices must be heard, but rather to argue that the question of who is involved in defining accountability standards is a moral question. At the same time, who is to be granted voice in the determination of accountability is not totally a moral issue. Certainly, this same issue can be looked at and discussed as a legal issue, but to overlook the moral significance of voice is a serious omission.

A third aspect of the moral basis of accountability concerns the content of the accountability standards themselves. What is deemed important to learn? That is, which subjects are tested? What content from these tested subjects is the focus of testing? Is it solely academic content which is to be assessed? In the

words of Kliebard (1989), the central curriculum question is, "What should we teach?" and this question, plus the related curriculum questions which flow from it, are "all value questions" (pp. 2, 5). Kliebard concludes that "curriculum development requires sophistication, judgment, and intelligence and only secondarily technical skill" (p. 5).

Interestingly, the issue of what content was emphasized by the North Carolina ABCs policy was not as prominent in seminar discussions as were questions of voice. That is not to say that the question of curriculum content was ignored by seminar members. For example, questions were sometimes raised about school subjects which were not tested, as in the case of the fine arts or elementary science. What would happen to these subjects as testing continued over the next few years? Questions were also raised about whether the "basics" were too narrow a focus for accountability.

But questions of voice seemed to override curricular concerns. I do not know why that happened since the question of what content ought to be taught is well-established in the curriculum field, being implicit in the first of Ralph Tyler's (1950, p. 1) classic curriculum questions: "What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?" I can only hypothesize that under the condition of "high stakes" testing the question of voice can easily become paramount, since the consequences are so telling for all those affected by state

accountability. Without voice -- and many of my seminar participants identified with public school teachers -- high stakes testing seems to arouse a strong sense of vulnerability.

The fourth and last moral basis of accountability I want to introduce is the nature of the student-teacher relationship. I started this essay with Henry Johnson's assertion to Senator Lucas that when students knew that they would not pass until third-grade content was mastered, "most kids are going to rise to those standards." Behind Johnson's comments is the idea that accountability for results will succeed because both teachers and students have been a bit lazy in the past. Now, under results-oriented accountability, there are real and meaningful consequences to keep everyone in the schools on their toes and working hard.

Under results-oriented accountability, the relationship between teacher and student becomes more serious, even to the point of sternness. In a sense, this demanding stance toward students is interconnected with the question of moral responsibility, since the actual responsibility of the state of North Carolina seems to be limited to the creation of a system of accountability. Nothing is presumed to be fundamentally wrong with the public schools that a little real accountability for students cannot resolve. All that is needed is a more precise focus on the academic basics and clear-cut consequences for those students who do not master these basics, as well as for those

teachers who fail to successfully teach the basics. A morality of high teacher demand on students permeates results-oriented accountability.

Other moral visions of the student-teacher relationship are not entertained. To view the classroom as caring community is a alternative conceptualization which is not consistent with a results-oriented approach to accountability. In fact, conceiving of the student-teacher relationship in caring terms may well be viewed as one of the barriers to results-oriented accountability.

Reorienting Next Year's Seminar

After exploring my experience with the North Carolina ABCs policy, I do have a rough idea of how I might rethink the seminar for next fall to increase the focus on the moral roots of accountability. I have a stronger sense of some of the moral issues which are embedded in accountability: responsibility, voice, important content, the nature of the student-teacher relationship. It is these issues which need more attention while my seminar group examines the ABCs policy. How are each of these issues embedded in a results-oriented view of accountability? If we desire to rethink ABCs accountability, what alternative views are both possible and desirable on each of these issues? What kind of accountability policy could be built on these alternative views?

Other perspectives besides the moral are certainly pertinent to accountability. For example, I need to continue the kind of

analysis which helps to locate assumptions which underlie the ABCs policy, and my students ought to read studies on the effects of similar accountability policies in other states. But the basic starting point to examine the ABCs should be an outright moral perspective. In addition, I will not repeat the assignment in which we critique the current ABCs policy through the preparation of a white paper. Fewer constraints should be placed on how my students can react to the issues of accountability in North Carolina.

What I have described here may seem like an unrealistic approach to state-level accountability. However, a major reason we have few alternatives to approaches similar to the ABCs is our unwillingness to deal directly with root accountability issues, issues which are fundamentally moral. To skirt these underlying moral issues is to accept the way others have cast these issues. While there may not be immediate results from considering accountability from a moral perspective, an ever grimmer future awaits us if we fail to take this route.

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